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THE U.S. AND CHAVEZ: TO CONFRONT OR TO CONTAIN?

by

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FS-01, U.S. Department of State

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: Mark J. Powell

23 October 2006

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## **Abstract**

### **The U.S. and Chavez: To Confront or to Contain?**

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has been a frequent, vocal, and harsh critic of U.S. officials and policy. He has actively opposed U.S. allies in the region, and key U.S. initiatives at the U.N. and OAS. Distant and recent U.S. history in the region, and U.S. priorities in the Middle East and elsewhere, constrain U.S. options vis-à-vis Chavez. The paper examines Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's anti-American rhetoric, actions, and objectives, and assesses the nature of the threat Chavez poses to U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere. Focusing on the Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME) instruments of national power, it then examines current, unstated U.S. containment policy under the rubric of U.S. Department of State's Mission Program Plans in Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil, and U.S. Southern Command's Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP). The paper reviews whether the U.S. ought best to confront Chavez, or contain him, examining the benefits and drawbacks of both courses of action. Finally, the paper offers recommendations on what aspects of the MPP and TSCP processes might be modified or emphasized in order to make U.S. policy towards Chavez more effective.

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## Introduction and Overview

On September 20, 2006, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez stepped up to the podium in New York to address the annual gathering of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). He proceeded to unleash a barrage of scathing remarks against President George W. Bush, whom he referred to as “the devil,” and against U.S. policy in Iraq and much of the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> The tone of Chavez’s litany of grievances fell well outside the traditional boundaries of decorum for such discourse, and they generated fresh speculation about his judgment, and – in some quarters – his sanity. This was not the first time Chavez had leveled such vitriolic criticisms of President Bush or other opponents, but Chavez’s performance ensured that for a time he became a leading figure in international media coverage of the UNGA even amid the contemporaneous headlines about the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iranian intransigence on its nuclear intentions, and the lead-up to North Korea’s detonation of an underground nuclear device.

A clinical determination of the actual state of Chavez’s mental health is beyond the ambition of this paper, but the issue is relevant to any attempt to clarify the driving objectives of the man and to assess the nature of the threat he poses to United States interests in the Western Hemisphere and, potentially, beyond. This paper will assess the nature of the threat first by briefly reviewing the social and political conditions that spawned Chavez; then consider U.S. strategic and operational options for mitigating the challenges posed by Chavez and the tools with which to do so, primarily the Department of State’s Mission Program Plan (MPP) process and U.S. Southern Command’s (Southcom) Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP).

Viewed in the light of the immediate and perhaps existential threats to U.S. interests posed by Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, the Chavez menace at present falls short of this threshold. This is not to dismiss as benign the intent and activities of Chavez. This paper will attempt to put him into context and examine the relative merits and disadvantages of the current U.S. policy toward Chavez – consisting largely of measures of containment – and of a more confrontational approach.

### Recapping the Rise of Chavez

In 1992, Venezuelan Army Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias, a paratroop officer, attempted to overthrow the elected government of President Carlos Andres Perez. The coup was thwarted and Chavez was arrested, tried, and convicted, spending some two years in prison until he was granted a pardon. He threw himself into politics where his populist message against real and imagined corrupt elites, and a remarkable ability to relate to the impoverished sectors of Venezuelan society, and was elected president himself in 1998. Chavez's authoritarian, divisive style of governance, however, failed to redress many of the grievances he himself had flagged – including corruption and economic malaise, and he quickly offended and alienated the country's middle- and upper class sectors. "The villainous elites included wealthy businessmen, corrupt political party leaders, coddled professionals, and kept unions...In other words, the Chavez government replaced rhetoric designed to suppress class conflict...with calls for the underprivileged to unite against those who had prospered between 1958 and 1998."<sup>2</sup> Chavez was himself briefly overthrown in April 2002 by a fractious but broad-based opposition, but the Venezuelan military returned him to office 48 hours later. When the U.S. failed to issue a categorical denunciation of his ouster, Chavez seized on

the issue, repeatedly blaming Washington for backing what had transpired, and bilateral relations continued to deteriorate.

Since his election in 1998, Chavez has been an irritant, repeatedly provoking Washington and re-casting in a negative way a bilateral relationship that had been close for many years. "...The cooperative attitude in matters of bilateral and multilateral foreign policy which once could be taken for granted has become confrontational, especially on issues that require not only agreement but negotiation. Tensions are especially pronounced in matters relating to the promotion of democracy, the fight against drugs, intellectual property protection, human rights, the environment, and security issues related to civilian air traffic."<sup>3</sup> In 2004, Chavez won a controversial "recall referendum" called against him, and is currently the front-runner for presidential elections due to be held in December 2006.<sup>4</sup> Like him or not, Chavez, or his legacy, will be with us for the foreseeable future: "And like Juan Peron, whose Peronism dominates Argentina to this day, Chavez is likely to succeed in building a social and political force – *Chavismo* – that will endure for some time."<sup>5</sup>

### The Nature of the Chavez Threat

Is Chavez, so readily dismissed by critics as a "tropical clown"<sup>6</sup>, merely an empty threat? Is he crazy, or crazy like a fox? "Chavez's defiance of Washington has been a defining characteristic of his regime from the outset...His speeches are peppered with virulent anti-U.S. rhetoric, charging Washington with imperialist designs and systematic exploitation of the poor."<sup>7</sup> The Venezuelan president's seeming habit of "shooting from the lip" in disparaging his opponents foreign and domestic, can make it difficult to determine where bluff ends and resolve begins, as "...there is often calculation behind

Hugo Chavez's verbal fireworks."<sup>8</sup> In the past year, Chavez has visited Russia, China, Iran, Belarus, Vietnam, and Syria,<sup>9</sup> destinations clearly selected with a view towards creating maximum discomfort in Washington. He has also publicly sided with Iran in its dispute with the IAEA and the U.S. over Tehran's suspicious nuclear program.

Presumably due in large measure to Chavez's expected occupancy of the Miraflores Presidential Palace for the foreseeable future, one informal survey of some 180 experts on international and regional affairs identified Venezuela as the 11<sup>th</sup> most likely adversary over the next five years (the highest in the Western Hemisphere), and the 20<sup>th</sup> most likely opponent within the next 20 years.<sup>10</sup>

Though unable militarily to threaten the U.S. directly, Chavez possesses the will, resources, and determination to oppose U.S. interests and allies throughout the region. Colombia is one of the closest allies of the U.S. in Latin America, and Chavez allows Colombian guerrilla groups such as the FARC to shelter on the Venezuelan side of the border. He even permitted a senior Colombian FARC leader, Rodrigo Granda, to operate in Caracas, until an understandably seething Colombian government had Granda kidnapped and returned to Colombia in 2005.<sup>11</sup>

For all the vicarious enjoyment in many countries of the "adolescent stridency of his anti-Americanism,"<sup>12</sup> hemispheric governments often view Chavez with concern. For example, resource-poor CARICOM nations nervously eye Venezuela's longstanding border dispute with a fellow CARICOM member state, Guyana.<sup>13</sup> Still, in 2005 most CARICOM members lined up when "...he (Chavez) inaugurated Petrocaribe, under which Venezuela will provide 198,000 barrels of oil a day to 13 Caribbean nations with 'soft' financing for up to 40 percent of the bill,"<sup>14</sup> although the agreement could well



render participating CARICOM states more dependent upon Venezuela and therefore more vulnerable to Venezuelan political pressure.

Venezuela is the world's fifth largest producer of petroleum, and long one of the largest and most reliable suppliers to the United States. Chavez appears to want to change that. One way to do this without interrupting the revenue stream from Venezuela's most abundant resource is to find a large alternative buyer, such as China, whose burgeoning economy has increased Beijing's appetite for petroleum. One observer describes Venezuela as "...currently China's principal strategic partner in Latin America, both in terms of investment, as well as in the nature of the relationship between the two countries,"<sup>15</sup> and on an official visit to China in 2006 Chavez agreed to triple oil exports to China in three years.<sup>16</sup> In view of current challenges facing the U.S. in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and the broader Middle East, the issue of oil is and will remain a critical factor in the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship. "Prior to 2003, the United States had viewed Venezuela as a stalwart production hub. Indeed, Venezuela steadily supplied some 15 percent of U.S. oil and gasoline imports – often a larger share than was delivered by Saudi Arabia...Venezuela also has the advantage of being geographically close to the United States. This means that it takes only six days for Venezuelan oil to reach U.S. shores."<sup>17</sup>

On October 2, 2006, while attending a hemispheric meeting of defense ministers in Managua, Nicaragua, General Bantz Craddock, Southcom Combatant Commander, noted increasing concern among regional countries about recent Venezuelan arms purchases, primarily of small arms<sup>18</sup> that could find their way into regional criminal or insurgent hands. Venezuela purchased \$3 billion in arms from Russia, including high-

performance Sukhoi 30 fighter aircraft,<sup>19</sup> some 100,000 AK-47 assault rifles, 53 Mi-35 assault helicopters, as well as “transport planes, patrol boats, speedboats, and Tucano jets from Russia, Spain, and Brazil.”<sup>20</sup> Cognizant of the potential implications for regional stability of Venezuela’s conduct, on August 17, 2006, the Department of State announced the revocation of defense export licenses to Venezuela.<sup>21</sup> As this paper was being completed, Spain announced on October 19 that it had cancelled a sale of 12 military transport aircraft to Venezuelan due to U.S. objections.<sup>22</sup> In multilateral fora the U.S. and Venezuela have clashed repeatedly in the OAS, and the U.S. is backing Guatemala against Venezuela for one of the 2006 rotating (non-permanent) seats on the U.N. Security Council, a position which Chavez has loudly proclaimed his intention of using (if Venezuela wins the seat) to oppose U.S. interests and initiatives.

#### Confrontation or Containment?

It can be difficult for North American audiences to appreciate how much real or perceived historical grievances continue to resonate with present-day audiences in Latin America, particularly when manipulated by a charismatic populist like Chavez. This reality, however, is essential to understanding Chavez’s tactics, appeal, and desired end state. The U.S. has considerable historical baggage in Latin America which provides Chavez with ample fodder for his war of words against the United States. Discussing the extent of U.S. military actions throughout Latin America during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, historian Walter Russell Mead notes, “As early as 1832, the United States sent a fleet to the Falkland Islands to reduce an Argentine garrison that had harassed American shipping. The Mexican War was, of course, the greatest example of American intervention, but by the Civil War, American forces had seen action in Haiti (1799, 1800,

1817-21), in Spanish Florida (1806-10, 1812, 1813, 1814, 1816-18, 1817), what is now the Dominican Republic (1800), Curacao (1800), the Galapagos Islands (1813), Cuba (1822), Puerto Rico (1827), Argentina (1833-1852, 1853), and Peru (1835-36). Between the Civil War and the Spanish American War, marines were sent to Cuba, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Haiti.”<sup>23</sup> Chavez skillfully mines this rich vein.

Although Venezuela does not currently pose a direct military threat to the United States, and “...most Latin American governments are hardly marching in lockstep with the Venezuelan president and are resisting joining a hostile, anti-U.S. bloc,”<sup>24</sup> Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006 aptly characterized Chavez as “one of the ‘biggest problems’ in the Western hemisphere.”<sup>25</sup> He is a singularly polarizing figure. Chavez should neither be minimized as a potential threat nor inflated to a status he does not warrant. To his credit, Chavez thus far has shown a measure of political dexterity in playing to his own domestic and foreign constituencies while ensuring that his statements and actions – though frequently harsh and calculated to provoke - do not rise to a level that would justify U.S. military action against Venezuela.

Current U.S. policy is to contain Chavez rather than to confront him.<sup>26</sup> As noted by U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela William R. Brownfield, in his Chief of Mission Statement framing the current (FY 2008) Mission Performance Plan, “The United States has a major interest in preserving and regenerating democracy in Venezuela and reversing the trend towards government which is increasingly authoritarian, defines itself in opposition to the United States, and has become much more focused on exporting its ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ within the region.”<sup>27</sup>

One benefit of the containment approach is that no matter how crafty Chavez may be, he is likely to overstep himself at some point, and the U.S. should be prepared to deal appropriately with such an eventuality when it arises. Indeed, there is some indication that the Chavez populist phenomenon may have peaked in the region. His vocal intervention in Peru's 2006 presidential election on the side of the eventual losing candidate, provoked widespread resentment in that country, and Chavez's support for the Bolivian government's nationalization of its energy sector, which negatively impacted Brazil's considerable petroleum sector investments in Bolivia, has driven a wedge between Chavez and important actual and potential allies.<sup>28</sup>

Badly stung by the widespread perception that it fomented or condoned the brief ouster of Chavez in April 2002, Washington has been more circumspect about reacting publicly to Chavez's recent setbacks. "The United States has learned the wisdom of staying silent in the face of Mr. Chavez's provocations...But the Bush Administration is clearly concerned at Mr. Chavez's new friendships. It has imposed an arms embargo on Venezuela. Last month it created a new post of intelligence coordinator for Venezuela and Cuba – a recognition that Mr. Chavez's close alliances with the aging Fidel Castro is an obstacle to America's hopes of a democratic transition in Cuba."<sup>29</sup>

#### The MPP, Theater Security Cooperation, and Containment

Underpinning the U.S. containment strategy are the interconnected civil-military elements of the U.S. Department of State's interagency-coordinated, country-specific Mission Performance Plan (MPP) process, and Southcom's Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP). Done properly, the individual country MPPs and the TSCP are inter-linked and complementary. They are the embodiment of the DIME concept of well coordinated

diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of U.S. power. “Because so much of IO (information operations) is done before a crisis occurs, and before a warning or an execution order is issued, it is the TSCP and the collateral Department of State reports that in essence constitute the IO attack plan.”<sup>30</sup> The current (FY’08) MPP for Venezuela contains a range of containment and threat mitigation goals that range from rebutting baseless charges by the Venezuelan government against the U.S. to placing clarifying opinion pieces in Venezuelan the media, to broad-based support for the democratic process in Venezuela.<sup>31</sup>

Embassy Brasilia’s current (FY’08) MPP seeks to leverage that country’s regional influence to help reduce tensions between Colombia and Venezuela (though Embassy Brasilia concedes these efforts have thus far been unsuccessful), and to contribute to the strengthening of the democratic process in Venezuela.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting briefly that in 2005 Embassy Brasilia even coordinated with Southcom and, with Centcom’s support, invited Brazilian diplomats and military personnel o Afghanistan to learn about Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) operations.<sup>33</sup> The visits never materialized, but the emphasis on attempting to establish and expand mutually beneficial, cooperative civil-military relationships is an important, ongoing function of both the MPP and TSCP processes. Two notable successes for Embassy Brasilia’s MPP were the 2004 visit of the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, and President Bush’s 2005 visit to Brazil.<sup>34</sup> Senior USG attention to a key bilateral relationship, indeed, to any bilateral relationship, pays real dividends in terms of signaling U.S. interest in and engagement with a country or region. By showing that the U.S. values Brazil as a regional partner, the U.S. undercuts critics who contend that the U.S. takes the region for granted, or that

Washington wants to control the region without investing significant time or resources to better understand it, or to help resolve its problems.

Admiral James Stevenson, Jr., commander of NAVSO, the naval component of Southcom, described the TSCP's essential alliance-building aspect when he said, "Partner nation navies and other organizations have demonstrated a commitment to our shared values and are visibly aligned with the United States. As our environment changes, we must look for new circumstances that will benefit our objectives and those of our committed partners."<sup>35</sup> Given the antagonistic state of relations between the U.S. and Venezuela, the TSCP is properly focused on deepening military to military contacts with friendly nations in the region to counterbalance *chavismo*. Until 2001, the inter-service U.S. Military Assistance Group (Milgroup) in Venezuela was an important means of providing training to, and building professional rapport with, Venezuelan military counterparts.<sup>36</sup> With the deterioration of the bilateral relationship under Chavez, however, Milgroup personnel were required to depart their longtime offices on Fuerte Tiuna, the primary Venezuelan army base in Caracas, and work out of the U.S. Embassy or other offices in the capital.<sup>37</sup> Strained mil-mil relations with Venezuela increases the importance of offsetting ties elsewhere in the region.

Southcom's TSCP initiatives are varied and extensive, including programs intended to further military to military contacts, humanitarian assistance training and cooperation, combined training and education, combined exercises, operations, intelligence sharing, and security assistance to coordinate common regional security goals.<sup>38</sup> A centerpiece of Southcom's TSCP is the annual UNITAS naval exercises, begun in the 1960's and described as "...the pre-eminent maritime exercise among South

American navies, taking interoperability to new levels each year.”<sup>39</sup> A more recent TSCP component is the PANAMAX exercise, in which military forces from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe undertake a multilateral training exercise in defense of the Panama Canal.<sup>40</sup> Also under the auspices of TSCP, the Operational Naval Committee (ONC) provides a mechanism for combined maritime operations in the theater, as it did when U.S. sea service representatives met to discuss Military Training Teams and subject matter exchanges.<sup>41</sup>

Colombia is an important partner in the containment strategy given its size, proximity to Venezuela, and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe’s frequently antagonistic relationship with Chavez.<sup>42</sup> Brazil is another, and with the size, economic power, and potential to become a regional superpower. Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva’s undeclared contest with Chavez for primacy in the “moral leadership of the region’s left”<sup>43</sup> offers potential opportunity to leverage against Chavez. Mexico’s government feuded publicly with Chavez when the latter backed the leftist opponent of the candidate vying to succeed conservative former president Vicente Fox.

Because of their small populations, the 15 member countries of CARICOM (the organization also has an additional five Associate Members) represent an often-overlooked area of leverage vis-à-vis Chavez. Absent a crisis in one of the countries, it can be difficult to get busy Washington policymakers or senior Southcom attention for the region, leaving some local leaders – however pragmatic they may otherwise be – smarting with the impression that “the U.S. only pays attention when it wants something, or there is a problem.” One need only consider CARICOM’s tendency to vote as a bloc in U.N. and OAS fora, to appreciate the importance of continued U.S. engagement

(allowing for exigencies elsewhere) by senior civilian and military officials with their regional counterparts.

Another non-military containment option worth considering is the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). As Thomas A. Shannon, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, explains, “The Bush Administration created the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Millennium Challenge Accounts, which are designed to take the principles developed at the Monterey U.N. meeting on financing development...and providing new monies and new funds to promote governments that make the right kinds of decisions, the right kinds of policy about fighting corruption, improving education, improving health care and creating an environment in which people develop individual capacities.”<sup>44</sup> As of September 2006, the U.S. had contributed \$500 million to MCA. Lower income countries with demonstrable progress in the areas outlined by A/S Shannon above, may qualify for considerable funding for development projects which they themselves determine, and which are monitored by the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation. U.S. assistance to qualifying countries potentially attracted to or threatened by Chavez is a potentially significant instrument for checking Chavez’s ambitions, with the added benefit of being far less likely to attract negative attention than non-humanitarian military assistance. Tying MCA more directly into MPP and TSCP consideration is an option worth exploring.

#### The Confrontation Option

For all of Chavez’s incendiary rhetoric, the U.S. is constrained in opposing him militarily. Absent an overwhelming provocation of a type Chavez is unlikely to provide, international public opinion, so strongly opposed to the war in Iraq, could be



expected to come down heavily on the side of Chavez in the event of a military confrontation with the U.S. Confrontation, however, need not necessarily be military in nature. Chavez is vulnerable on the information front. By focusing on the IO component, the U.S., acting through the regional Country Teams and in close coordination with Southcom, could raise the profile of public diplomacy/IO in pointing out Chavez's many failings. For example, despite Venezuela's oil wealth, and having assumed the mantle of champion of Venezuela's and the region's poor, poverty levels under Chavez have risen considerably.<sup>45</sup> Chavez repeatedly condemns U.S. "imperialism" and "hegemonistic" intentions, while using oil to purchase influence throughout the Western Hemisphere. Violent crime is a persistent and growing problem in Venezuela. Corruption, too, is increasingly a problem.

#### Recommendations

Under present circumstances, a military solution to the challenge posed by Chavez would be less advisable than the pursuit of a modified version of the current containment policy. The key elements of the modified version are political, military, and IO in nature. Politically, senior U.S. officials should continue to deny Chavez the attention he craves by declining to be drawn into public disputes with him. Notwithstanding the considerable issues competing for their attention elsewhere in the world, senior U.S. officials – civilian and military - should give a higher priority to Western Hemisphere affairs, both in terms of time and resource to address regional issues, and in terms of a series of coordinated high-profile visits by senior U.S. officials to the region. This would go some way toward undermining the perception that Washington ignores the hemisphere unless there is a crisis brewing. The time to plant

seeds for cooperation is now, to be for harvested during future crises. The U.S. should continue to work closely with regional partners, particularly Brazil and Colombia, to identify common political objectives.

Next, enhanced military-to-military engagement is essential to forging professional relationships, improving force interoperability, and strengthening the concept of civilian control of the military. Many mid-level and senior Venezuelan officers were in uniform long before relations with their U.S. counterparts turned sour under Chavez, and the U.S. should seek to re-establish old contacts, or establish new ones, at neutral venues, such as on the margins of international military gatherings. Given the current bilateral climate, this would admittedly be very sensitive. Progress in each of these areas, coupled with the demonstration of genuine U.S. engagement in the region, will help to dissuade Chavez from military adventurism.

### Conclusion

Chavez is a threat to U.S. interests, but not yet an existential one. He possesses the desire and the means to oppose U.S. objectives, and to threaten U.S. allies, but he has been prudent enough to avoid provoking a military confrontation with the U.S.

U.S. Embassy Country Teams in the region should coordinate closely with Southcom to continue working with regional allies, particularly Colombia, and build stronger ties to important regional powers such as Brazil. Mindful of CARICOM's vulnerability to economic manipulation by or military threats from Caracas, as well as CARICOM's substantial potential as a voting bloc at the UN and in the OAS, the U.S. should seek ways to enhance bilateral-, multilateral-, and military relations with Caribbean states. On the Washington end, senior officials should be regularly advised of

useful opportunities to engage with regional counterparts, to visit the region when appropriate, and to build key relationships and demonstrate U.S. engagement before problems arise.

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